

North Coso Range

CDCA 130

NORTH COSO RANGE WILDERNESS STUDY AREA (WSA)

(CDCA-130)

1. THE STUDY AREA ---

10,171 acres

The North Coso Range WSA is located in Inyo County in the northwest portion of the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA). The nearest communities are Darwin, 12 miles east; Trona 40 miles southeast; Olancho 15 miles northwest; and the Ridgecrest 52 miles to the south. The area is composed of 10,103 acres of public land under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and no acres of State land or split estate lands within the WSA. There are 68 acres of private lands (see Map 1 and Table 1).

The northwestern boundary is a four mile stretch of State Highway 190. On the east end of the northern boundary, it jogs south for one mile and then east for one mile until it meets State Highway 190 again. The boundary follows State Highway 190 south for seven miles until it intersects with an unnamed dirt road. The dirt road extends west for two and one-half miles until it converges with another dirt road for six miles which forms the eastern boundary of the WSA.

The WSA contains approximately 40% dissected fans, 30% alluvial fans and 30% hills. Physiographically, the area drains westerly towards Owens Dry Lake. The lowest portion of the WSA is 3,660 feet. The landforms gain elevation in the middle of the area and then levels off and becomes part of Lower Centennial Flat at 4,680 feet. Vegetation is composed mostly of creosote bush and succulent scrub, low desert shrubs and annual plants. No rare or sensitive plant species are known to occur within the WSA.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). Four alternatives were analyzed in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the CDCA Plan: protection, use, balanced and no action; a summary of the area's wilderness values was included in Appendix III of the Final EIS.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE ---

0 acres recommended for
wilderness

10,103 BLM acres recommended for
nonwilderness

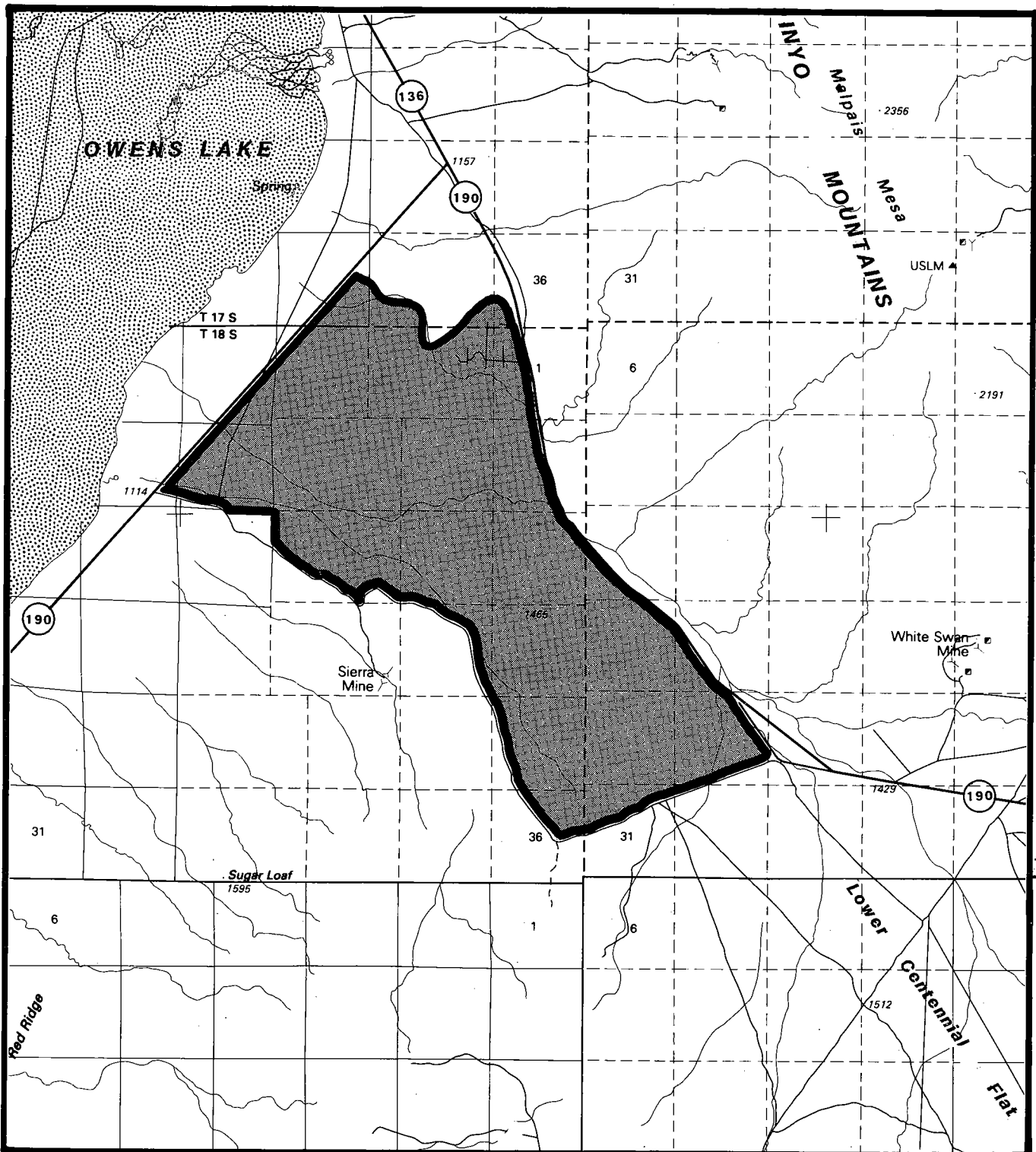
No wilderness is the recommendation for this WSA. The entire acreage in this WSA is released for uses other than wilderness. This recommendation will be implemented in a manner which will use all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts. The Balanced Alternative is the environmentally preferable alternative as outlined in the CDCA Plan and further explained in the California Wilderness Study Overview.

While the WSA did meet the general criteria of wilderness as defined in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act of 1964, further studies during the preparation of the California Desert Plan determined that the area's values as wilderness were exceeded for other uses for the following reasons: (1) a moderate potential exists for uranium and cinders within the area; (2) solitude is drastically affected by highway and military aircraft noise; and (3) off-highway vehicles use the area extensively.

Potential for uranium is moderate within the northern two-thirds of the area. If this material becomes scarce, exploration and development could drastically effect the area. Because of required maintenance of State Highway 190, cinders from the WSA will be needed as base material for highway maintenance.

An above-ground power line and buried cable right-of-way located within the WSA causes a loss of naturalness along the eastern boundary of the WSA. State Highway 190 causes a direct loss of solitude to the northern one-third and eastern portion of the WSA due to noise from vehicle traffic.

There are approximately two miles of routes of travel including primitive ways, washes and other unmaintained routes of access which will remain available for vehicular use. Off-highway vehicles make use of the area for rockhounding to gather opal. It is also close to the Olancho Dunes Off-Highway Vehicle Open Area and receives spill-over use on the WSA's system of vehicle routes.


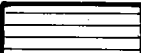



T17S
T18S

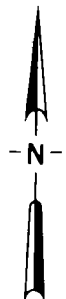
T18S
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R38E R39E

- | | | |
|---|---|----------------------------|
|  | NONE | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS | |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS | |

- | | |
|---|--------------|
|  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | STATE |
|  | PRIVATE |

**North Coso Range
Proposal
MAP-1**



CDCA-130
JUNE, 1988

TABLE 1 - Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area

| <u>Within Wilderness Study Area</u> | | <u>Acres</u> |
|---|--------------------------|------------------|
| BLM | (surface and subsurface) | 10,103 |
| Split Estate | (BLM surface only) | 0 |
| Inholdings | | |
| State | | 0 |
| Private | | 68 |
| Total | | <u>10,171</u> |
| <u>Within the Recommended Wilderness Boundary</u> | | <u>Acres</u> |
| BLM | (within WSA) | 0 |
| BLM | (outside WSA) | 0 |
| Split Estate | (within WSA) | 0 |
| Split Estate | (outside WSA) | 0 |
| Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness | | <u>0</u> |
| Inholdings | | |
| State | | 0 |
| Private | | 0 |
| <u>Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness</u> | | <u>Acres</u> |
| BLM | (surface and subsurface) | 10,103 |
| Split Estate | (BLM surface only) | 0 |
| Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness | | <u>10,103</u> |

3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Wilderness Characteristics

1. Naturalness: The area has been affected primarily by natural forces, with man's imprint substantially unnoticeable within the majority of the area. Some vehicle routes lie in the northernmost portion of the area. An electrical power line and underground cable are located along the eastern boundary of the WSA and adversely affect naturalness, both rights-of-way weave their way in and out of the WSA along that border. A small route enters the WSA from the eastern border above the Lower Centennial Flat area.

2. Solitude: Solitude can be found within the WSA although it cannot be considered outstanding. State Highway 190 forms the north and east boundary of the area. Truck and vehicle traffic noise from this highway cause a loss of solitude within the northern and eastern portions of the area.

This WSA is periodically overflowed by military aircraft as part of the national defense mission taking place in approved military operating areas and flight corridors. The visual intrusions and associated noise create periodic temporary effects on solitude which are deemed necessary and acceptable as a part of the defense preparedness of the nation.

3. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Because of the diverse topography and natural portions of the area, opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation can be found throughout the area. The wilderness traveler can hike and backpack through the area in an unconfined manner.
4. Special Features: Prehistoric cultural resources identified within the WSA indicate camping, and tool making. Historically, Shoshone groups have hunted and collected native plants in the area.

B. Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS)

1. Assessing the diversity of natural systems and features as represented by ecosystems: This WSA contains 10,103 acres of the American Desert/Creosote Bush (Larrea) ecosystem, which is well represented in the California Desert by other suitably recommended WSAs. The North Coso Range WSA would not increase the diversity of the ecosystem represented in the NWPS.

Table 2 - Ecosystem Representation

| Bailey-Kuchler Classification Domain/Province/PNV | <u>NWPS Areas</u> | | <u>Other BLM Studies</u> | |
|---|-------------------|--------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| | <u>areas</u> | <u>acres</u> | <u>areas</u> | <u>acres</u> |
| <u>NATIONWIDE</u> | | | | |
| American Desert/Creosote Bush | 1 | 343,753 | 117 | 4,257,806 |
| <u>CALIFORNIA</u> | | | | |
| American Desert/Creosote Bush | 1 | 343,753 | 88 | 3,664,002 |

2. Expanding the opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation within a day's driving time (five hours) of major population centers: The WSA is within a five-hour drive of five major population centers. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of the population centers.

Table 3
Wilderness Opportunities for Residents
of Major Population Centers

| <u>Population Centers</u> | <u>NWPS areas</u> | | <u>Other BLM Studies</u> | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| | <u>areas</u> | <u>acres</u> | <u>areas</u> | <u>acres</u> |
| <u>California</u> | | | | |
| Anaheim-Santa Ana | 25 | 2,823,534 | 153 | 5,703,616 |
| Bakersfield | 32 | 4,071,358 | 128 | 3,998,548 |
| Los Angeles-Long Beach | 27 | 2,876,234 | 135 | 4,958,751 |
| Oxnard-Ventura | 23 | 2,195,198 | 85 | 2,703,260 |
| Riverside-San Bernardino | 22 | 2,031,054 | 205 | 7,658,649 |

3. Balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas: The WSA is within 50 air miles of ten BLM WSAs recommended for wilderness designation. The closest designated wilderness area is Golden Trout Wilderness, twenty miles away in the Sequoia National Forest.

C. Manageability

The North Coso Range WSA is manageable as wilderness. However, development of valid mineral values would present management problems. There is a moderate potential for uranium in the northern two thirds of the WSA. The eastern portion of the area has a moderate potential for cinder deposits which would be used to maintain State Highway 190.

Two rights-of-way for a powerline and buried underground cable are present within the eastern border of the WSA. The rights-of-way are in proximity to State Highway 190 and weave in and out of the WSA along this border. If the area is designated wilderness, the boundary should be adjusted to exclude the existing rights-of-way.

The area receives moderate use by off-highway vehicles due to rockhounding and proximity to the Olancho Off-Highway Vehicle Open Area. Because of the existing off-highway vehicle interest within the Wilderness Study Area, the area would have to be actively monitored, patrolled and properly signed to prevent illegal entry and degradation of wilderness values.

Military overflights in this WSA must be considered to maintain the integrity of the existing and future national defense mission as well as the wilderness resource.

D. Energy and Mineral Resource Values

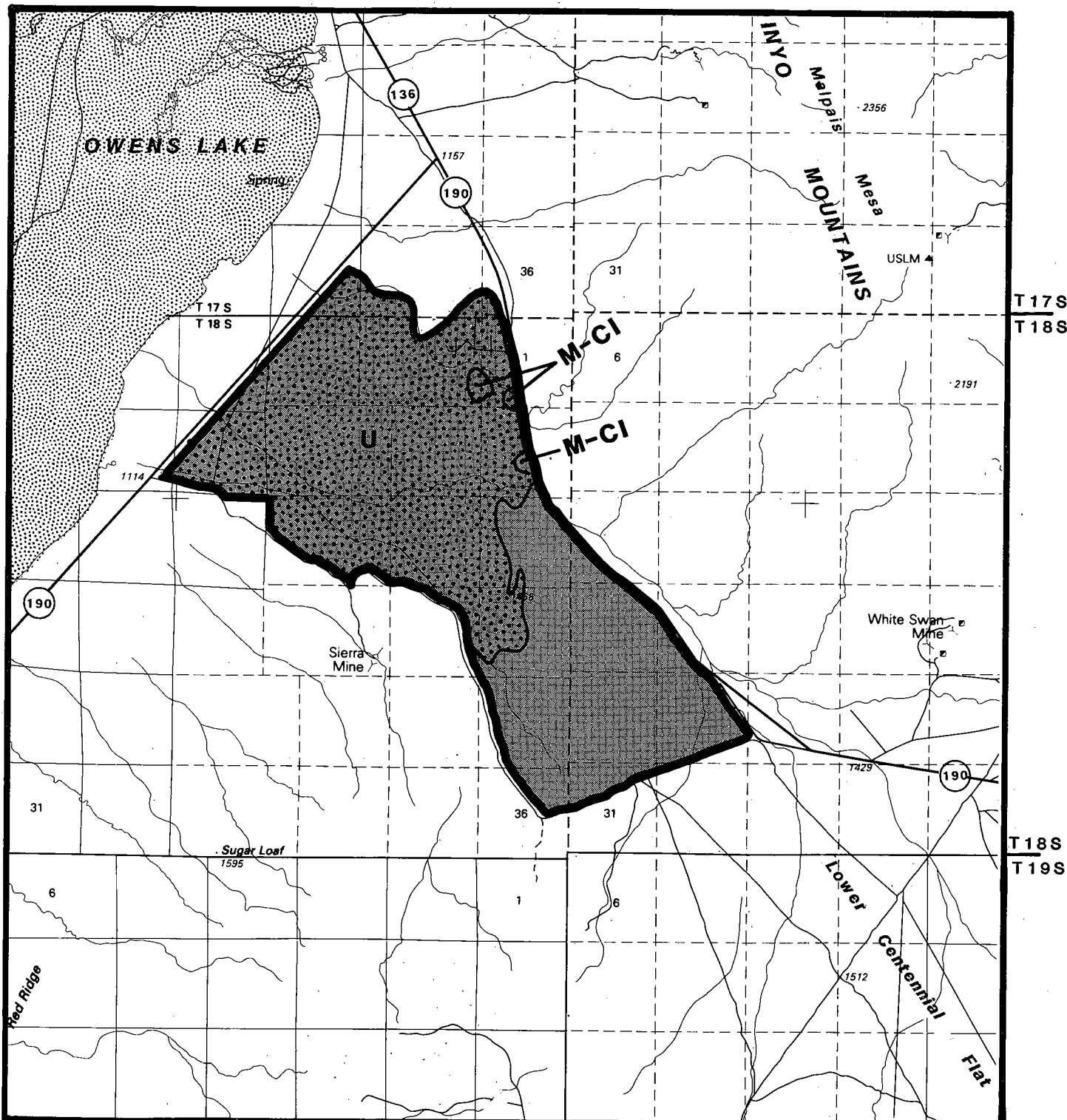
1. Summary of Information Known at the Time of the Preliminary Suitability Recommendation: The North Coso Range WSA is in the BLM Haiwee Reservoir Geology-Energy-Mineral (G-E-M) Resource Area (GRA). BLM G-E-M data in the wilderness section of the CDCA plan EIS (Volume B, Appendix III) was not fully analyzed, integrated or interpreted at the time of the preliminary suitability recommendation. However, the 1968 EIS G-E-M narrative did state that the WSA has a potential for the occurrence of uranium, clay, pumice, cinders, perlite, sand and gravel. An unknown number of mining claims located within the WSA were recorded with the BLM on December 12, 1979.

The 1968 BLM GRA file does not contain a GRA report classification for the occurrence of metallic, nonmetallic or energy mineral resources. The GRA file does contain National Uranium Resource Evaluation Program analysis of stream drainage sediment data which shows a uranium anomaly in the northern two-thirds of the WSA. The 1968 BLM GRA file data also contains geologic information that identifies favorable rock types often associated with the occurrence of pumice, cinders, perlite, clay, sand and gravel.

2. Summary of Significant New Mineral Resource Data Collected Since the Preliminary Suitability Recommendation Which Should be Considered in the Final Recommendation: No U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) or U.S. Bureau of Mines (BOM) mineral surveys were conducted in the WSA because it is recommended nonsuitable for wilderness designation.

According to Stinson (1977, Geologic map and sections of the Keeler 15-minute quadrangle, Inyo County, California, California Division of Mines and Geology, Map Sheet 38), the entire WSA is underlain by sandstones, siltstones and clay of the Coso Formation. Stinson states that uranium mineralization is locally present and associated with the rocks of the Coso Formation. Based on the BLM classification system, the northern two-thirds of the WSA, as shown on the accompanying map, is classified as having a moderate potential for the occurrence of uranium using the BLM mineral classification system.

Stinson also identified and mapped rock types overlying the Coso Formation often associated with deposits of clay, sand, gravel pumice and perlite and crushed rock. The central one-third of the WSA is classified by BLM as having a low potential for the occurrence of crushed volcanic rock products. The entire WSA can be classified as having a low developmental potential for sand, gravel and clay. Three small, isolated deposits of cinder in the eastern portion of the WSA near State Route 190 were identified and mapped by Stinson. Due to apparent quality of the cinder and the local need for road base materials for the maintenance of State Route 190, the cinder deposits shown on the accompanying map were classified as having a moderate occurrence potential.



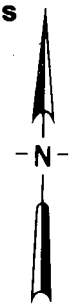
- NONE Recommended for Wilderness
- Recommended for Non Wilderness
- Land outside WSA Recommended for Wilderness
- Split Estate
- State
- Private

Explanation

- High Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
- Moderate Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
- M** Moderate Mineral Potential Location in a High Mineral Potential Area
- H** High Mineral Potential Location in a Moderate Mineral Potential Area

Commodity Symbols

- U** Uranium
- CI** Volcanic Cinders



**North Coso Range
Mineral Resource Potential**



**MAP-2
CDCA-130**

In 1983 and 1984, BLM issued approval for a plan of operations and two plan amendments for exploration drilling on the Coso prospect. The Coso prospect consisted of 168 unpatented mining claims located primarily to the southwest of the WSA, but extending into the WSA to the northeast of the Sierra Talc Mine. Actual drilling was not conducted within the WSA, however, a drill hole was located along the boundary road outside the WSA north of the Sierra Talc Mine. Results of the drilling have not been made public. In addition, casual use surface sampling on the Sadarach lode claim northwest of Hill 4568 in the eastern central portion of the WSA has been conducted since 1985. Results of the sampling program showed anomalous values of gold and silver mineralization.

Mining Claims within the WSA are summarized on Table 4, taken from BLM mineral records dated December 7, 1987. The claims are located in the northeast and west-central portion of the WSA.

Table 4 - Mining Claims

| TYPE | NUMBER | | | ACRES | | |
|-----------|----------|----------|-------|----------|----------|-------|
| | SUITABLE | NONSUIT. | TOTAL | SUITABLE | NONSUIT. | TOTAL |
| Lode | N/A | 8 | 8 | N/A | 160 | 160 |
| Placer | N/A | 0 | 0 | N/A | 0 | 0 |
| Mill Site | N/A | 0 | 0 | N/A | 0 | 0 |
| Total | N/A | 8 | 8 | N/A | 160 | 160 |

E. Summary of Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action

1. Impact on Wilderness Values: Opportunities for wilderness values could suffer adverse impacts due to potential mineral exploration and development for uranium. Site-specific areas would be impacted due to extraction of cinders within the eastern portion of the WSA. This impact is considered to be minor since mitigation of impacts must follow strict regulations as found in the CDCA Plan. Continued off-highway vehicle use would reduce opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreational opportunities.
2. Impact on Locatable Mineral Exploration and Development: Opportunities for exploration and development would continue to be available within the area. However, mining activities would be restricted as a result of regulations and management guidelines outlined in the CDCA Plan which limits vehicle access and mitigate adverse effects on sensitive resource values.
3. Impact on Motorized Recreation: Opportunities for motorized recreation on designated routes would continue to be available within the area.
4. Impact on Native American Values: Opportunities for vehicle dependent access by Native Americans would not be hindered by the recommendation.

F. Local Social and Economic Considerations

No local social or economic considerations were identified in the Final CDCA Plan and EIS. Therefore, no further discussion of this topic will occur in this document.

G. Summary of WSA - Specific Public Comments

Public comments were solicited throughout all phases in the development of the CDCA Plan, finalized in 1968. Issues raised by the public during the Inventory and Study Phase were taken into account during development of the Draft Plan Alternatives and Proposed Plan. The following is a summary of all comments received. Inaccuracies that are known to exist are noted in parentheses.

1. Inventory Phase: Most of the comments referred to motorized recreational interest in the area. Others challenged the classification of the road along the southwestern boundary. Further field examination supported the findings.
2. Study Phase: Twenty-four of the thirty-one comments received on WSA 130 opposed wilderness designation. Eleven of these were identically marked Wilderness Forms from members of California Association of Four-Wheel Drive Clubs; they stated that roads, mine structures, and campsites interfered with the area's wilderness quality and that the past and potential use of the area by recreational vehicles was very high. The fact that the Interim Critical Management Plan designated the area as open was mentioned by several respondents. A frequently mentioned feature of the area was said to interfere with wilderness quality was the noise from overflights of jet aircraft from George Air Force Base and from the Naval Weapons Center. Other writers wanted to keep the area open for hunting and for geothermal resource development.

The study comments favoring wilderness designation addressed the need for protection of air quality, wildlife (black toad) and vegetation (the black toad does not inhabit the area). Values of primitive recreation opportunities were also mentioned.

Three letters were received in response to the Public Input Workbook (3/15/79). Two expressed support of wilderness preservation and designation. One addressed the need to consider the potential for geothermal energy development in this area.

3. Draft Plan Alternatives: No public comments specific to this WSA were received in response to the Draft Plan Alternatives. However, this WSA was one of those opposed by the National Outdoor coalition, a coalition of mining, rockhounding and off-highway vehicle groups. A large number of club members sent in printed coupons supporting this position. Conservation organizations and

their members wrote many letters recommending wilderness designation for all WSAs within the CDCA. The Inyo County Board of Supervisors opposed wilderness designation for the area.

4. Proposed Plan: There were no specific comments on this particular WSA in response to the proposed plan. Motorized vehicular organizations and conservation groups maintained the same positions stated for the Draft Alternatives, as did the Inyo County Board of Supervisors.

